

RISK TO READINESS: EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES REGARDING THE
IMPORTANT FACTORS IN NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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This research reports focuses on the success/ lack of success for Native American students in the public school system. The researcher introduces the study by describing the role boarding schools played in assimilating Native American children as well as the legislation throughout the twentieth century regarding Native American education. Then, the researcher describes and analyzes her findings from interviewing school administrators, school counselors, and other educators. And finally, the research in this report provides educators with knowledge regarding the roles that educators play in assisting Native American students with higher achievement.

The targeted population for this study consists of school administrators, school counselors, and other educators working with Native American populations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Our schools have failed to nurture the intellectual development and academic performance of many Native children, as is evident from their high dropout rates and negative attitudes towards school.” (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force Report as quoted by Gilliland, 1995, p.2)

Are Native American students at risk for dropping out of school? Will they reach their own potential and grow into adults who believe in themselves and who consider themselves successful? According to Gilliland (1995), there are many classrooms in which Native American students are at the bottom of the line emotionally, socially, and, most of all, academically. Fortunately, there are other classrooms that inspire high achievement, promote cultural awareness among students, and help Native American children become contributing members of society. What is really happening in Indian Education today, in the early part of the 21st Century? This question provided the motivation for this research project.

In order to more clearly understand the nature of Native American education in the United States, the researcher first looked into the history of Native American education; then, she investigated the circumstances surrounding Native American education in the past; and thirdly, she examined the pertinent issues affecting Native American public education today. Subsequently the researcher chose to look at this question by interviewing school personnel in two school districts in the northeastern

region of Wisconsin. These school districts were chosen because both Native American and non-Native American students were represented in the student body.

There is a growing volume of educational research that illustrates the significant issues facing Native American students. Concerns for Native American students focus around the issues of academic achievement (for some there is only minimal performance in core academic subjects) the school social climate, and the very high drop out rates compared to other ethnic and racial groups (Swisher & Hoisch, 1992). As recently as 1993, reports indicated that the “national high school dropout rate for Native American students was shown to be between 30% to 50%” (Backes, 1993, p.3).

The Native American population is growing at a fast pace and the majority of the population is between the ages of six and sixteen (Tierney, 1992). According to his book, *Official Encouragement, Institutional Discouragement*, Tierney (1992) stated that less than 60% of Native students will graduate from high school. Although those are only approximations, one study suggests “that less than 40% of those students who graduate from high school will go on to college and 85% will not receive a college degree” (Tierney, 1992, p.8). That would mean if 100 students entered the ninth grade, only 60 of them would graduate from high school (Tierney, 1992, p.9).

In another account reported by Jefferies, Nix, and Singer (2002), the National Center for Education Statistics only reported dropout rates in the United States during 1996 for White, Black, and Hispanic racial-ethnic groups, completely overlooking Native American minorities. The report stated that since there were relatively small sample sizes of American Indian/Alaska Natives and Asian/Pacific Islanders, these groups were included in the summarized total instead of being shown separately (Jefferies, Nix, &

Singer, 2002). In 1994, the United States Department of Education Report stated that Native Americans had a national high school dropout rate of 25.4% compared to Blacks with 14.5%, Hispanics with 18.3%, Asians with 7.0%, and Whites only 9.4% (Jeffries, Nix, & Singer, 2002). After 1994, federal agencies halted researching and reporting specific data on Native Americans because of the small sample sizes making it difficult to track the progress of education for Native Americans.

To understand where Native American education is now, one must look at the evolution process and history behind the institution. As far back as the beginning of the twentieth century, the status of Indian education was bleak. There were many unresolved issues regarding assimilation policies and land allotment conflicts between the government and the Indian people. To promote assimilation, Native American children between the ages of six and sixteen were forced to attend boarding schools (Tharp, Lewis, Hilberg, et al., 1999). Richard Henry Pratt, the U.S. Army captain, founded the Carlisle Indian School in 1879 (Szasz, 1974). This military leader's most extensive contribution was convincing the public that Native Americans were able to be educated (Szasz, 1974). The success of Carlisle's school gave way to the sudden upsurge in off-reservation boarding schools (Szasz, 1974). Shortly before the turn of the century, other forms of education were introduced. The main alternatives were reservation boarding schools, otherwise referred to as day schools.

Today, the concern about the high secondary dropout rates among Native Americans has not decreased. The indication is that individuals who lack a high school diploma are at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to their ability to support themselves in today's society (Tharp, Lewis, Hilberg, et al., 1999).

“Schools that respect and support a student’s language and culture are significantly more successful in educating those students.” (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force Report as quoted by Gilliland, 1995, p. 20)

This researcher will first summarize the role boarding schools played in assimilating Native American children. Then, this researcher will highlight landmark legislation throughout the twentieth century regarding Native American education and will document the current state of the education system today. Next, this researcher will present the results from the interviews she conducted, emphasizing the important issues currently affecting Native American learning. Finally this researcher will focus on specific areas in which counselors can assist Native American students, including the importance of the counselor/family connection in raising the level of their academic achievement. In the process, transitional issues affecting Native American students will be reviewed, and specific programs for Native American students will be identified.

What are the barriers that lead to the lack of success and consequently dropping out of school for Native American students? What is the role for administrators, school counselors, principals and other school personnel in ensuring that Native American students feel culturally safe within the school walls and are motivated to reach their educational goals? Are Native American middle school and high school students at risk?

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine the characteristics that lead to success/ lack of success in Native American students. Data for this study were collected through conducting interviews with school personnel. Participants included administrators,

school counselors, and other educators in pre-selected schools located in Vilas and Oneida Counties, in the northeastern region of Wisconsin.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. According to school administrators, counselors, and other educators, what are the major issues affecting Native American learning?
2. According to school administrators, counselors, and other educators, what are the roles of the school counselors in assisting Native American students?
3. According to school administrators, counselors, and other educators, what is the significance of the counselor relationship with the Native American community in raising the level of Native American student achievement?
4. According to school administrators, counselors, and other educators, what is the impact of transitions for Native American students, especially the transition from middle school to high school?
5. According to school administrators, counselors, and other educators, what programs are in place for Native Americans to assist them in middle school and high school?

Definition of terms

These are the terms that need to be defined for clarity of understanding. These terms are as follows:

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA.): The BIA., as the trustee for Indian peoples, is responsible for the overall welfare of the Indian people and for the administration and management of their tribal nations. As part of this trust responsibility, the BIA.

administers and manages 55.7 million acres of land held by the United States for American Indians, Indian Tribes, and Alaska Natives (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2003).

Culture: Culture may be defined as “people's traditions, history, values and language that make up the framework of a group that contributes to their identity” (Gilliland, 1995, p.18).

Dropout: This term refers to a student who stopped attending school and did not graduate or did not transfer to another public, private, or state approved education program (Backes, 1993).

Native American/ Indian/ American Indian: These terms refer to individuals who identify themselves as belonging to federally recognized tribes.

Non-completion: This term is used to refer to students who entered the ninth grade but did not graduate with their class after four years or had not officially enrolled in another public, private, or state approved education program (Backes, 1993).

Assumptions and Limitations

It was assumed that through interviews, this researcher would receive honest and reliable data from administrators, school counselors, and other educators. The researcher encouraged school professionals (administrators and counselors, and other educators) to articulate what they perceived as helpful or hindering to students' completion of middle school and high school. The limitations of this study included the possibilities that participants might not answer the questions with complete honesty, or that the participants might not work with Native American students on an ongoing regular basis. Information gathered from the participants in the survey are subject to the interviewer's

interpretations and will not be generalized to other school districts with substantial Native American populations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will provide a historical overview of Native American education. It will encompass a look at the important role boarding schools played in assimilating Native peoples and the experiences of Native American children within these schools. It will also discuss landmark legislation throughout the twentieth century regarding Native Americans and will document the current state of the educational system, bringing in the academic achievement of Native American students. In addition, some of the important benchmarks and public education acts that were developed to diminish the inequality that Native American children faced in relation to the school system will be highlighted.

History

“Let me be a free man—free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose. Free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself—and I will obey every law or submit to the penalty” (Burnette & Koster, 1974, p. 42). This quote, an excerpt from Burnette & Koster (1974), describes what Chief Joseph sought for his Native American family. He wanted the freedom to choose what type of education he and his children would receive. These words of Chief Joseph, spoken in 1879, were heard but not understood. From this time forward, Native American communities have been confronted with education systems that have been oppressive and culturally irrelevant.

An attempt to provide a traditional European education to Native Americans began in the sixteenth century. For three hundred years, Protestant and Catholic

missionaries dominated the schooling of Native American students through boarding schools under the auspices of the United States federal government. Native American people were segregated in the form of missionary and boarding schools, which did not provide equal educational opportunities for all students. These schools left a profound mark on Native people's lives. Boarding schools encompassed both victimization and segregation (Davis, 2001). Boarding schools attempted to assimilate Native people into mainstream society, denying them their culture, and identity, which eventually fueled the drive for cultural self-determination in the late twentieth century.

An army officer named Richard H. Pratt set up the first boarding school at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1879, and, thus, began the first as part of assimilation for Native American children (Tharp, et al., 1999). Pratt's school had dormitories, classrooms, shops, a hospital, and a jail for the more stubborn students (Burnette & Koster, 1974). These boarding schools devastated Native American students because students were not allowed the right to speak their own languages, sing their beloved songs, or look to their religion for support. "Curriculum failed to reflect Native languages, values, and customs and often presented negative Native images" (Martin, 1996, np). At various times, boarding schools made a conscious, vigorous effort to extinguish anything Native American including their cultures, languages, religions and dress. Indeed, assimilation was the ultimate goal of this type of school system. The lack of culturally appropriate curriculum and deliberate efforts to assimilate Native Americans were compared to cultural genocide (Martin, 1996). Not surprisingly, Native students had difficulty maintaining their cultural values within the dominant society. And, tragically, schools were very destructive to the identities of Native children (Martin, 1996; Davis,

2001; Castanada, et. al., 1974). Pratt and his staff had a similar goal in mind that included assimilating the students and wiping away any traces of their culture. “Here was the final solution to the Indian problem: isolate the Indians in boarding schools, destroy their culture, and digest them as second-class whites” (Burnette & Koster, 1974, p. 43).

The assimilation school process expanded quickly, Pratt’s Rosebud School on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation opened in 1884. The school was run very much like Carlisle School, in military fashion. The students had to wear uniforms and march to and from class. Native American children were placed within courses that matched how much previous education they had endured. It was not uncommon to find teenagers sitting in kindergarten classes (Burnette & Koster, 1974).

According to the book, *The Road to Wounded Knee*, “the single greatest impression the boarding schools made on their Indian prisoners was the lack of compassion and sheer brutality of the school environment” (Burnette & Koster, 1974, p. 44). During World War II, the staff was in charge of discipline and they used brass-studded harnesses to keep students in line. In addition, the disciplinarian delegated authority to the older boys, who were allowed to whip the younger children. Misbehavior even if it was slight (getting their shoes wet) resulted in punishment. One such punishment for offending students was mandating their being lashed with belt buckles (Burnette & Koster, 1974). According to Burnette and Koster (1974), the main theme of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA.) boarding schools was hate. Staff members purposefully tried to put cultural barriers between full-blooded Indians and mixed blood Indians, as well as between these two groups and whites. This created much suffering

among the children, especially the younger ones. The mixed-bloods were taught to humiliate the full bloods because they were the symbol of Native American life. BIA schools emphasized vocational training. Consequently, many Native American students did not realize there was any other type of education available.

In *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*, the author, Lomawaima, focused on the off-reservation multitribal boarding school in northeastern Oklahoma, between its founding in 1882 and 1940 (referenced in Davis, 2001). The author acknowledged the endless rules, harsh discipline, homesickness, and cultural loss that boarding schools inflicted on Indian children. She discussed the ways in which institutions sought total control over students' lives in order to assimilate them completely into the dominant society (Davis, 2001). The physical distance between the reservations and these boarding schools (often hundreds of miles apart) imposed by the schools caused great hardship for children and their families. School officials discouraged visits home, seeing these visits as a threat to assimilation. This policy, in turn, led students to be separated for more than three or four years from their parents and other relatives (Davis, 2001).

In an article reprinted for *Organization of Historians Magazine*, Davis (2001) discussed various authors' perspectives of those who have studied Native American boarding schools. One such author, Brenda Child, argued that there is a direct connection between boarding school experiences and cultural perseverance. She noted that when some students returned to their reservations, they felt distanced from tribal traditions and alienated from community members (Davis, 2001). And, yet, some students were able to work themselves back into community life on the reservation. It is clear that boarding

school experiences became fundamental components of twentieth century Indian people's identities (Davis, 2001). Boarding schools had a profound and lasting psychological impact on Native students, and for better or worse, the schools became part of their histories (Child, 1998, cited in Davis, 2001).

Before granting citizenship to Native American people in 1924, no studies had been done by the United States government to determine the educational status of Native Americans. That changed in 1926 when the Senate ordered a survey of conditions in answer to the complaints of Indians across the nation about the terrible living circumstances and corruption on the part of the Indian agents (Burnette & Koster, 1974).

Lewis Meriam and his associates from the Bookings Institution were commissioned by the United States Secretary of the Interior to document the socioeconomic status of Native American in the hope that some recommendations could be made to alleviate specific problems within the structure of the tribes. The result of this study was the Meriam Report, produced in 1928 (Woocock, & Osman, 2001). The findings showed that federal Indian policies were not sufficient in helping the Tribal populations with their own affairs. The report also found a great need for adequate secondary education and aid to students going on to post-secondary institutions (Woocock & Osman, 2001). And it raised the general public's awareness that some tribes did not have a government. After a series of hearings in Congress, a bill was enacted to address these issues. It was titled the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, known in Indian country as the IRA (Burnette & Koster, 1974).

Immediate changes occurred as a result of the Meriam Report. Roosevelt appointed Harold Ickes as Secretary of the Interior and, in turn, he brought John Collier,

an anthropologist and an advocate for Native American education, into the government as the Commissioner of the Bureau Indian Affairs. The Indian people had endured years of poverty on the reservation. Collier met with traditional leaders who complained of broken treaties from the past. At the same time, Indians began to organize a campaign of their own to counter the Indian Reorganization Act. This counter-revolution was defeated, but the IRA did put an end to the land allotment, thus documenting how much Indian land had officially been lost to the government (Burnette & Koster, 1974).

As Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier became part of the Roosevelt Administration responsible for initiating the “New Deal.” The New Deal’s Indian Reorganization Act, provided hope of constitutional promises of liberty for Indian people. In addition, the act provided financial assistance for economic growth, ended the steady loss of Indian lands, and gave the Indians both the right for legal representation, and the right of tribal government (Burnette & Koster, 1974). “The New Deal” was supposed to bring about changes in social, political, and economic facets of Indian life. For the first time, Native Americans had hopes that there would be legislation that would better life for Indian communities (Woocock & Osman, 2001). Despite all the promises, the traditional leaders of the states were unsure of how to enact the legislation so as not to disrupt the form of government the Indians had created for themselves.

“The Johnson-O'Malley (JOM) Act of April 16, 1934, was a basic federal aid program specifically designed to provide funds to local off-reservation communities and other Indian-owned, tax exempt land areas, where Indian tribal life was largely broken up and Indians were mixed with the general population” (Watchman, 1994, np). Funds were primarily designated for education but could be used for other purposes such as medical

attention, agricultural assistance, and social welfare. In 1958, when Public Law 81-874 was amended to include assistance for educating Indian children, the JOM program became a supplemental aid program (Watchman, 1994). JOM funds totaled \$16.5 million in 1970. In that same year, the federal government contributed an additional \$17 million under the Elementary and Secondary School Act, aimed at helping school districts with a large percentage of Native American students (Burnette & Koster, 1974).

It was not until 1953 that the federal government began to realize that the integration of American Indian children into public schools would raise their levels of education attainment as well as assimilate them. For many Native American families, their first exposure to the public school system was not a good one. In fact, some Native Americans would not attend new public schools because whites were opposed to having them as part of the school (Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998).

The 1960's and 1970's were very important decades for Indian education. In the 1954 case, *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*, the Supreme Court found that segregation was unequal and denied constitutional rights for those being segregated. Congress passed a number of laws that required local school officials to create programs for economically disadvantaged students, minority children, and students with special education needs (Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998). Congress also established Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, and the Indian Education Act of 1972. For Native Americans, these educational laws passed meant that American Indian children in need of extra skill assistance in reading and math would be served. More specifically, ESEA provided remedial programs for American Indians.

In addition, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1965 directly affected Indian populations (Woocock & Osman, 2001). Specifically, this act opened up opportunities for people to seek on-the-job training, participate in adult education classes, and receive loans for small businesses in order to attack the roots of unemployment and poverty.

Also, under this legislation, President Johnson enacted new programs such as Head Start, Upward Bound, the Job Corps, VISTA, and the Indian Community Action Program. Moreover, in 1967, the BIA established the National Indian Education Advisory Committee. This committee was made up of sixteen Indian representatives who were in charge of advising the Commissioner of the BIA on educational issues (Woocock and Osman, 2001),

Another major study of Indian Education was conducted by the U.S. Senate in the 1960's. The special Senate subcommittee in charge of documenting the struggles of the Indian population focused on the low levels of educational attainment of American Indians. The resultant report was entitled, *A National Tragedy—A National Challenge*, and became known as the Kennedy Report (Woocock & Osman, 2001). This report shocked the nation. The Senate subcommittee reported that the state of affairs for Indian education was a national tragedy and a disgrace. The findings showed that throughout the history of Indian education, the schools which Indian children attended were disregarded and ignored by those entrusted with the education of Indian children. In fact, the years between the 1928 Meriam Report and 1969 had seen virtually no improvements in Indian education. Native American populations had suffered continually from high dropout rates, low achievement, and negative self-image. And, there was a general absence of American Indians in the field of education (Szasz, 1974; Wright, Hirlinger, &

England, 1998). Report NO. 91-501, known as the Kennedy Report, documented these specific issues in Indian Education:

- The destruction and disorganization of Indian communities and individuals.
- Prejudice, racial intolerance and discrimination toward Indians far more widespread and serious than generally recognized.
- The classroom and the school: a kind of battleground where Indian children attempt to protect their own integrity and identity as individuals by defeating the purposes of the school.
- Schools failing to recognize the importance and validity of the Indian community.
- Schools blaming their own failures on the Indian students and reinforcing their defensiveness.
- A high record of absenteeism, dropouts, negative self-image, low achievement, leading to academic failure for many Indian children.

(All of the above points were quoted verbatim from Woocock and Osman, 2001, p. 810).

The committee concluded with three different findings. First, the federal policy of “coercive assimilation” had done nothing for Native American children in terms of their education. This meant that the attempt to assimilate Native American children into the dominant culture had failed and led to both cultural loss and victimization of Native American children. Next, Native American students had not been given “educational opportunities near equal to that offered the great bulk of American children” (Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998, p.13).

The Last Thirty Years

In the last thirty years the civil rights movement has focused attention on the rights of Native Americans. A 1970 survey by the Office of Education and Robert Havighurst of the University of Chicago showed that the Indian dropout rate was 43% for grades eight through twelve. Other races were significantly lower at 32% (Burnette & Koster, 1974). Havighurst also reported that Indian children, more than children of other minority groups, believed themselves to be below average in intelligence and to have the poorest self-concept among the school population (Burnette & Koster, 1974).

The Indian Education Act (IEA) of 1972 was the only piece of equal opportunity education legislation specifically focusing on American Indians (Burnette & Koster, 1974). The program under the IEA was directed at public schools in the early 1970's where more than 70% of the Native American school-age population was enrolled. Part A of the act was known as the "Indian Elementary and Secondary School Assistance Act." In theory, Part A was drawn up to provide assistance to local education agencies in order to establish programs meeting the special needs of American Indian students (Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998). Part B of the act provided funds for programs and projects to improve American Indian educational opportunities. Some of the components listed in the legislation included research and educational plans that could be used to develop bilingual and curriculum materials for use by local education agencies. The act also recognized that there was a definite responsibility on the part of the federal government to provide assistance to Native American people. A case in point was the struggle of the Menominee Nation School and the Shawno School District in the 1970's to provide their Indian students with equal opportunities.

The Menominee and the Shawno School District

In the 1970's the students of the Menominee Schools in Menominee County, Wisconsin, faced cultural racism stemming from not only in the school, but also from within the school board. As detailed in his book, *Freedom with Reservation: the Menominee Struggle to Save Their Land and People*, Shames found out that Menominee tribal students did not fare well when they reached the Shawno Public schools (Shames, 1972), In comparison to students from Shawno, Menominee County students measured poorly. To clarify, estimates showed that Menominee enrollment reached a peak at the seventh grade level where there were 86 Indian students out of a total of 248. By their senior year only 36 Indian students were enrolled out of a total of 291. The dropout rates were extremely high, as was the failure rate (Shames, 1972). Estimates show that 60-65% of the Menominee students failed one or more subjects (Shames, 1972). A Menominee tribe member wrote that half the Indian students entering the Shawano school system were either failing or had quit by the time they would have graduated as seniors (Shames, 1972). Shames (1972) stated that racist remarks from the Shawano Senior and Junior High students, a harsh school discipline problem, and unequal enforcement of the discipline code by school officials were some of the contributing factors leading to the high drop-out rate. Also contributing to the high dropout rate included bad teacher attitudes towards Native Americans, a lack of Indian administrators, teachers, and counselors, transitional issues, and no courses on Indian history or contemporary Indian problems. All of these issues, in turn, caused a lack of "motivation" (Shames, 1972, p. 51). In 1972, the Shawano Public School district did not employ a single Native American counselor, teacher, or administrator, nor did it have a single

Native American organization. In addition, some of the officials claimed “one of the reasons for the academic problems that Menominee students have is the lack of reading materials in their homes” (Shames, 1972, p. 54). Termination status of the reservation in 1961 left the Menominee in poverty, and, thus, their low socioeconomic standing became a major contributing issue in their education struggle.

For the Menominee, a part of what appeared as racism to the Indian students was only communication problems caused by white students’ inability to understand the cultural differences of their Indian counterparts (Shames, 1972). In March of 1972, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) released a report addressing the premise of racism. The study reads, “There was a feeling on the part of some white students in the middle school of wanting to have better relations with the Indians if ‘we only knew how.’” (Shames, 1972, p. 51).

The Department of Public Instruction study suggested some ways in which problems might be alleviated. They included 1) intensive counseling services, 2) sensitivity sessions for Shawano school personnel, 3) exposure of all students to Menominee culture, 4) hiring of Menominee school personnel, 5) better cooperation with Menominee parents, 6) more use of and better materials that include Indians (with an evaluation committee made up of Indian students and parents,) 7) use of older Menominee to add to the history studies (tapes, etc.), and 8) the development of an advisory social studies curriculum committee comprised of both white and Indian parents (quoted verbatim from Shames, 1972, p. 61). In 1973, the Menominee were reinstated as a federally recognized tribe. As a result of addressing some of the above DPI suggestions, the Menominee Nation now has its own educational institution of higher

learning, The College of the Menominee Nation, chartered by the Menominee Tribal Legislature in 1993 (Great Lakes Intertribal Council, 2004).

Despite gains made by such tribes as the Menominee Nation, more remains to be done. In the book, *The Politics of Second Generation Discrimination in American Indian Education*, Wright et. al. (1998) stated that in 1990, the Office of Indian Education funded 1,153 programs in forty-two states serving the special education needs of over 354,000 elementary and secondary American Indian students (Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998). The question that remains is how effective has the IEA program been in promoting equal educational opportunities for those children?

In the early 1990's, after President Clinton was elected, Indian leaders throughout the United States made it known their concerns about the nation's neglect to follow through with plans to help meet the needs of Indian communities and the education system. The two federal government reports --*Indian Nations at Risk: an Educational Strategy for Action* (1991) and *The Final Report of the White House on Indian Education* (1992) "documented the failure of schools to address the needs of Native students and recommended that support be provided them including culturally relevant education" (Martin, 1996, np). The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force Report (1991) described the status of education for Native children in the United States based on the testimony of hundreds of Native American parents, school board members, educators and students. It maintained that Native communities were at a serious risk because U.S. schools have discouraged the use of native cultures and languages, hence weakening the self-concept and identity of Native American people. Historically, problems associated with the

education of Native Americans have been reflected by the reporting of high dropout rates, as well as low expectations, and, in some instances, racism. Consequently, extra emphasis was placed on the topic of culturally relevant education, the implementation of which was to be a priority for all schools serving Native American populations (Martin, 1996).

In 1992, Indian people gathered from all around the country in Washington D.C., for the first White House Conference on Indian Education. Conference delegates passed resolutions expressing strong support for the teaching of Native languages and cultures in schools and employing teachers who understand and build cultural into the curriculum (Gilliland, 1992). These delegates also stressed the importance of Native communities becoming involved in the decision-making process and rule enforcement of schools (Martin, 1996).

The preceding narrative outlines the tumultuous path that Native American education has traveled from its inception to the present day. Regardless of the fact that Indian Education has been called by Congressional reports “a national tragedy” (Nations at Risk Task Force Report cited in Gilliland, 1995, p. 13), there are Native Americans who have become “doctors, teachers, and ministers, and more Native American citizens are successfully attending universities and colleges today” (Gilliland, 1995, p. 268). Native American students were not taught to value their culture; instead, they were forced to leave any traces of their heritage and their cultural pride at the doorsteps of the boarding school. Gilliland, wrote in his book, *Teaching the Native American*, “It is essential that we enhance the self-esteem of students, give them pride in their culture, identity, and a belief in their ability and importance to others” (Gilliland, 1995, p. 268).

Issues in Indian Education Today

The Task challenging Native communities is to retain their distinct cultural identities while preparing members for successful participation in a world of rapidly changing technology and diverse cultures (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force Report, quoted verbatim from Gilliland, 1995, p. 1).

Will Native Americans make significant strides in the classroom? Will they reach their full potential and reach their individual goals, believe in themselves, and consider themselves successful? There are many classrooms in which Native Americans are at the bottom of the line academically, socially, and emotionally, where neither the students nor the teacher expect a great deal. Fortunately, there are other classrooms in which Native American children are happy, highly successful students, and are learning how to become contributing, healthy members of society (Gilliland, 1995). There is much current interest among Native people in promoting Native language development and culture, which may be as a result of many decades of oppression. In Wisconsin, the Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, Oneida, and Menomonee have active language programs. According to Gruber and Machamer (1996), there is a firm belief within the Native American professional community that high achievement in academics and motivation depend on nurturing the spiritual well-being of Native students, paying attention to development in their early school years, and creating a sense of positive self identity. What public schools have lacked in the past is that they have not recognized or built upon the heritage of their minority students. The cultural differences between home and school have made the transition extremely difficult (Gilliland, 1995; Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998; Burnette & Koster, 1974).

The educational perceptions of American Indian adolescents may vary depending on the schools they attend (Machamer & Gruber, 1996). According to a journal report by Machamer and Gruber (1996, p.136), “youth who attend reservation schools may have different feelings about their Native American heritage because they may not be subjected to dominate social values or prejudice.” A study conducted by Wahl and Madack in 1991 (cited in Gruber & Machamer, 1996), found that there are different perceptions between Native students who attended a public school and those who attended tribally controlled school. In general, Native students who attended the tribal school felt that their parents and favorite teachers had higher education aspirations for them than did who attended the public schools.

Low levels of educational attainment for Native American youth have been continually documented (Gruber & Machamer, 1998; Martin, 1996; Wright, Hirlinger, & England, 1998). In addition, the “links between students’ family relationships and their educational attitudes and behaviors indicate that family variables have an important influence on Native education” (Machamer & Gruber, 1998, p.357). Poverty, alcoholism, marital instability, and single-parent households may have a direct correlation with how well a family is able to thrive. For students from all ethnic/racial backgrounds, “socioeconomic status plays a key role in determining both educational and occupational aspirations” (Gruber & Machamer, 1996, p. 136).

It is not uncommon for individuals to respond to a stressful or negative family environment by making hasty or negative choices in an attempt to escape the reality of their life situations. Interactions between parents and children and among siblings are a

powerful influence. Interactions can include positive behaviors such as showing support, interest, and communicating openly (Gruber & Machamer, 1996).

“The links between students’ family relationships and their educational attitudes and behaviors indicate that family variables have an important influence on Native education” (Gruber & Machamer, 1996, p. 137). In a qualitative study of Native American high school dropouts conducted in 1980, the relationship between the students and teachers played an important part in determining whether or not the students chose to end their educational quest. Over one third of the Native American students stated that the “teachers did not care about them” (Gruber & Machamer, 1996, p. 137). According to the survey, home-related problems also played a role in determining whether or not the student stayed in school. Roughly 40% of the Native American students believed that the lack of parental involvement was the basis of their decision and that problems at home led to their decision to drop out of school (Gruber & Machamer, 1996). This study indicates how advantageous parental involvement and teacher support can be in order for the Native American student population to reach their scholastic potential.

Writing in the *Journal of Education* (1998), Gruber and Machamer showed the links between poor educational outcomes and risk-taking behaviors between Native American students. A survey of 27,335 randomly selected 7th and 12th graders in New York State found that students who received poor grades were more likely to drink alcohol (Barnes & Welte, 1986, as referenced in Gruber & Machamer, 1998). Risk-taking behaviors included skipping classes, being sent to the principal, or calling a student’s home as the strongest predictors of the consumption of alcohol. According to the report, White and Native American students had a higher rate of drinking alcohol than

did Black, Hispanic, and Asian students. Even though there were no significant differences in the quantity and frequency of drinking-related instances, the authors hypothesized that for Native American high school students the adjustment from being the majority to the minority might have a more direct impact (Gruber & Machamer, 1998).

The transition from being the majority in one school, and then entering a school where the ethnic majority has shifted is a concern for schools in Wisconsin as well. It is not uncommon for students to feel overwhelmed or fearful during transitional, life changing events. Moreover, for Native American students who do not know what to expect, this transition into a new school environment can be extremely difficult.

In 1997, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that American Indian students had a dropout rate of 35.5%, about twice the national average and the highest dropout rate of any United States ethnic or racial group (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education (1997)). In 2000, the National Education Association reported that Native American students continue to rank at, or near the bottom of every education indicator in terms of academic success (Cheek, 2000). The national graduation rate for the public school class of 2000 was 69%. The rate for white students was 76%; for Asian students it was 79%; and for Native Americans it was 57%. Nebraska had the lowest graduation rate among Native American public school students with 40%, followed by Minnesota, Nevada, and Oregon (Cheek, 2000). This negative situation should come as no surprise considering that just fifty years ago the federal government was involved in the termination of Indian tribes.

A recent explanation as to why Native Americans do poorly and have negative educational experiences involves the cultural differences between Indian cultures and the dominant culture (Reyhner, 1992). Erik Erikson, a well known theorist in child development, pointed out that in order to build strong positive identity, educators need to reinforce and build on the cultural training and messages that children have previously received (Reyhner, 1992). Unfortunately, many times Native American children hear conflicting messages from home and from school that can cause confusion and create resistance towards the school. Gilliland (1995) states in his book, *Teaching the Native American*, that school officials such as teachers, counselors, and administrators, are often not aware of the seriousness of the problems children have in being Indian in the non-Indian world of public schools. For mainstream children, the ways, ideas and values they are taught in school reinforce and build on the teaching they have received since birth. However, for Native Americans the ways, ideas and values they are taught in school can be in direct opposition to what they have been taught at home.

An important issue affecting Native American students is how much or how little school faculty have invested in working with their students. As far back as 1969, the Kennedy Report found that one-fourth of the elementary and secondary teachers of Indian children admitted not wanting to teach them (Reyhner, 1992). A promising remedy described by Reyhner (1992) is the importance of employing educators who are willing to enhance the self-esteem of all the students by giving them pride in their culture, identity and a belief in their importance to others (Gilliland, 1995). Teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel can convey loving support to students by

listening, by validating their feelings, and by demonstrating kindness, compassion, and respect (Bernard, 1997; Gilliland, 1995; Reyhner, 1992).

Fostering the development of the whole child necessitates collaboration between the school, family, and the community (Reyhner, 1992). According to Gilliland (1995) and Reyhner (1992), by having parental involvement in Indian education (parent-teacher conferences or events for the students), there is a reduction in the cultural discontinuity between home and school (Gilliland, 1995). Parents need to have effective input as to how and what their children are being taught (Reyhner, 1992). With a positive working relationship between the school and the home, students will be able to feel good about themselves and contribute to the betterment of the community.

According to Martin (1996), improved education for Native American people will enable them to achieve equal political status within American society. It will also bring about a sense of cultural pride and revive the feeling of hope and promise for the future of their children. Thus, only with the best possible education will Native Americans be able to maintain their values while coexisting in mainstream society (Martin, 1996).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will include information about the participants in the study: how they were selected for inclusion in this research and how the data was collected from them. Additionally, the survey instrument will be discussed both in terms of how it was developed and in terms of content, validity, and reliability. Data analysis procedures will also be incorporated into this discussion. Finally, the chapter will highlight some of the methodological limitations of the survey instrument.

Subject Selection and Description

The participants in this interview study were administrators, school counselors, and other educators in pre-selected schools located in Vilas and Oneida County, in the northeastern region of Wisconsin. These school districts were chosen because both Native American and non-Native American students are represented in their schools. A letter, specifying the intent of the study and requesting participation, was mailed to educators in these pre-selected schools, educators who were working with Native Americans during the 2003-2004 academic school years. Participants were asked to mail back their consent form (See Appendix A). A total of thirteen people responded to this letter, and, subsequently, participated in the survey. Participants were from both the middle school and the high school. Two additional individuals, who work with Native Americans but who did not participate in the survey, met with the researcher to discuss current issues affecting Indian youth. The school staff in this study agreed to participate voluntarily and signed a consent form. Included in the consent form were 1) description

of the research, 2) risks/ benefits associated with the interview process, 3) confidentiality verifications and 4) permission to use a tape recorder.

Instrumentation

The structured interview questions were designed specifically for this study by the researcher in consultation with her research advisor. The resultant structured interview design incorporated a series of open-ended questions intended to elicit comprehensive and thorough explanations of the issues affecting Native American success/ non-success in the school setting. This structured interview consisted of eleven questions, which the researcher used for every participant (See Appendix B). Because the interview questions were constructed specifically for this study, there are no applicable measures of validity and reliability.

Demographics of Data Collection

The data gathered in this study was collected through face-to-face interviews by the researcher. The thirteen pre-selected participants included the following: district administrators, tribal attendance coordinators, guidance counselors, social workers, principals and assistant principals, Indian education mentors, and directors of pupil services.

Data Analysis

The researcher recorded the data on a tape recorder during the interview process, and, then, transcribed the interviewees' responses upon completion of the interviews. Afterwards, the researcher analyzed the responses, comparing the views of administrators, counselors, and other faculty in the aforementioned school districts.

Limitations

The limitations in this study relate to the method of data collection, data analysis, and the pressures that some participants may have felt to respond in a socially appropriate fashion. In most cases, the participants were receptive to signing the consent form, agreeing to have their views recorded, and answering the open-ended questions. A few participants did not want to be interviewed or felt uncomfortable being recorded, and chose not to be interviewed/ recorded or both. One individual wrote down short answers to the questions but refused to be interviewed in person. Also, there was a tendency for some of the professionals to hesitate before answering questions or word their answers in a manner which did not to jeopardize their professional positions within their respective school districts. One school official listened to the researcher's questions and refused to answer on the basis that he/she would have to isolate Native American students from other populations within the school. He/She declined to talk specifically about Native Americans in the school, and, instead, chose to make generalizations about the student body as a whole entity.

The voice recorder added undue pressure for some participants and, in turn, some had a difficult time concentrating on the interview discussion. Answers to the interview questions were subject to the interviewer's interpretations and should not be generalized to other school districts, even those school districts with substantial Native American student populations.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will present the results from the interviews that were conducted by the researcher during the months of January through March, 2004. The first section will highlight the major issues currently affecting Native American learning as witnessed by educators within the participating school districts. The next section will focus on specific areas in which counselors assist Native American students to raise the level of their academic achievement. In the subsequent section, the importance of the counselor/family connections in bridging the gap between the school and the Native American communities will be discussed. This section will be followed by a look at the difficulties in making the transition from middle school to high school for Native American students. Then, the specific programs for Native American students that are in place within the school districts in these counties will be identified. Finally, based on the survey participants' feedback, strengths and weaknesses of some of the existing curriculum will be discussed.

Major Issues Affecting Native American Learning

The general consensus among participants of the study was that there are a variety of external factors affecting Native American students' ability to succeed within society's traditional education system. The major causes appear to be peer attitudes, social beliefs, and community issues. Participants of the survey discussed in detail the stigmas associated with Native Americans being successful during high school and also how the Native American communities value cooperation and compromise versus competition. Other family factors, not limited to the Native American population, include abuse,

divorce, and addiction as well as financial strain. It is important to understand that there may be many circumstances surrounding whether students are able to achieve their highest potential. Awareness of these factors helps educators to establish a framework in which to implement a safer school community atmosphere. Such a safer school climate will enable educators to plan better teaching strategies and curricula for students (Castaneda, James, & Webster, 1974).

According to one of the survey participants, a social worker, “*things are dark and narrow for the American Indian student.*” Even though this respondent did not elaborate on this statement, the above mentioned family factors, the restricted structure of the school day, and the day to day interactions with other students may be causes for concern. Many of the survey participants were of the opinion that at the middle school and high school levels, friendships and peer pressure cause a great deal of stress and can have negative effects on education.

The process of learning and behavior is very much affected by both family and peer involvement. In accordance with almost half of those educators interviewed, within Native American tribal cultures, it is traditional for people to work together in harmony, doing their part to enhance the lives of other members of the tribal community. In most Native American groups, there is a great loyalty to close friends and respect for one another as human beings. The family and community expect that an education will make the students better able to contribute to the group as a whole. For Native Americans, the first priorities are family and community; getting jobs and raising individual statuses are second priorities.

According to one administrator at the high school level, some students share the attitude that *“everyone is in the same boat together and, instead of competition, they value cooperation and equality.”* The approval rate from friends is more rewarding and motivating to them than the prospect of a successful job or career. As one of the interview participants stated, for individual people, it is better to help maintain the status quo than to climb the non-Indian ladder of success. This finding is in accord with Gilliland (1995) who found that a person who is considered successful by the community and is, therefore, a good role model for the children is the elder who has helped others, rather than the one who has gained wealth or prominence in the non-Indian world. A collective sentiment of the people interviewed was that in the past if one or two young people succeed academically, athletically, or through other means, other Native American students joined together to pull the flourishing student down. Illustrating this sentiment, one school official said, *“The Native American students who are successful are susceptible to far more harassment than the Native peers who do average or below average achievement.”* This statement suggests that this practice of “pulling the floundering student down” is still at play in the Native American communities.

Concurring with this statement is Melvin Buckholtz, an Indian Education Mentor, and a highly respected faculty in one of the pre-selected school districts. He spoke about how some of his students have a passive self-advocacy mentality. According to him, asking for help or asking questions is something that does not happen very often with his Native American students. Deep in the mind-set of these students is a fear of looking foolish in the eyes of peers or teachers. Buckholtz also referred to the pressure and negativity towards one another for trying to be successful, calling it the “crab syndrome.”

This “crab syndrome” is illustrated by the following story, which he told the researcher: “Two guys are fishing for crabs. One guy’s crabs keep crawling out of the bucket. They keep crawling out and escaping. The other man who is fishing does not have that problem; he catches a crab and it stays there. The first guy says, ‘How come my crabs keep trying to get out of the bucket and yours are not doing that?’ The other guy responds, ‘My crabs are Native American.’ The first guy says, ‘what do you mean?’ The response: ‘When one gets to the top, the others keep pulling him down.’”

Seven educators out of the thirteen who participated in the survey brought out the slang used by their Native American students to describe the high achieving Native American pupils. Students use words like “*apple*” in a derogatory fashion to imply that a successful American Indian pupil is “red on the outside and white on the inside.” Such slang connotes that when Native Americans choose to participate in extra-curricular activities or take a more active approach to education, they are more likely to become vulnerable to cruel words and ridicule by their Native American peers.

The attitude among Native American students is that these students are conforming to the dominant culture’s value system, not the values of Native Americans. According to some of the educators who were interviewed, in the dominant society, being young is valued. Children are encouraged to succeed and to climb the ladder of success. But, in Indian cultures, parents are more inclined to encourage their youth to listen to the ways of the elders because the young people lack the maturity to make wise decisions.

Success, if it is defined as “*do[ing] better than one’s friends, or make [ing] large amounts of money*” is not an Indian ideal according to one survey participant. As illustrated by the background research for this project (see Chapter Two), most Native

groups value cooperation, equalitarianism, and informality. These are more important than individual achievement or competition. Individuals who show that they can do better than their peers are teased and criticized. In such situations, as pointed out by the majority of the survey respondents, these Native Americans may be ostracized and made to feel ashamed.

Interview participants also remarked that some Native American students do not feel emotionally safe either at school or at home. They try to deal with the peer pressure or bullying that takes place at school on their own because they are too apprehensive to ask counselors or teachers for help. In the opinion of over half of the interview participants, the overall family issues and family support/ lack of family support have a great deal to do children's abilities or willingness to achieve success at school. Social issues (such as divorce, abuse, or addiction) affect a wide population of people in both majority and minority groups. But, according to one administrator interviewed, the amount of alcohol consumed and drug abuse on the reservation is significantly higher than it is in other feeder school communities located in Vilas and Oneida Counties. As a result, the incidences of fetal alcohol syndrome and abuse are more prevalent. It is these outside factors that contribute to the students' having a greater/ lesser sense of psychological stability and their ability to function within the academic setting.

Another interviewee, a school counselor, countered this opinion with the statement, "*Family problems or the incidence of alcohol abuse is not unique to the Native American population; instead, it is magnified because of the smaller, independent community.*" Likewise, a different administrator stated that the way our economy is, all families are being forced to become more work-oriented. He/She continued by

explaining that the household is financially stressed to a greater degree and more hours are spent at work, away from home, leading to a lack of family time. These factors, in turn, affect the children. The less time the family spends developing familial relationships, the more the children will suffer. When parents are in crisis, it is extremely difficult for children to concentrate on school academics.

Another Indian educator, who did not participate in the survey, discussed the social issues affecting Native American students and their families with the researcher, emphasizing that certain factors are important in order to make the transition into the school system successful. This educator correlated these factors with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. According to Maslow, there are general types of needs (psychological needs, such as safety, love, esteem) that must be satisfied before a person can function. Maslow called these needs, "deficiency needs," stressing that as long as people are motivated to satisfy these cravings, people are moving towards growth, towards self-actualization. This educator underscored the relevance of Maslow's ideas in understanding students by noting that most teenagers have a need to feel this group acceptance before they can perform well in school. Summing up, this educator said, *"Often times it is the children who have the support from relatives, community members, and elders with stable and structured homes that succeed."*

School Counselors Assisting Native American Students

Survey participants responded to a survey question pertaining to the duties related to school counselors' working with Native American students. As indicated by many of these administrators and school personnel respondents, counselors play a very versatile and prominent role in the lives of Native American students. They work with Native

American students to help them realize and reach their highest potential during their school careers, even arranging for tutoring and assistance in academics if necessary. Also, they work with these students on a personal/social level with help in conflict resolution skills training. And, they do individual counseling with these students. The survey participants emphasized that still another dimension of the counselor's job is ensuring that students are seeking out post-secondary opportunities, and are exploring career options.

The first dimension of school counselors' duties is to assist Native Americans in achieving academic success. They deal with such issues as the following: if a student is struggling with a class, what would be the best option for the next semester? One administrator that works directly with students acknowledged the importance of weighing a student's options with the students, themselves. If they have failed math class, should they take the same class next semester? Or should they wait until the following year, knowing that they will have lost that valuable time in between? The same survey interviewee noted that, "*Counselors provide a learning environment for our students and build quality relationships with family and the community.*"

The second facet of school counselors' duties is working with Native American students on a personal/social level. An important position expressed by one research participant is that students are looking for respect and affirmation. A counselor from one of the pre-selected schools stated that "*If I know that a student is having problems, I will offer him/her services so they do not have to struggle alone. This is where school counselors are advocates for their Native American students.*" Another educator described the importance of being honest with these Native American students about

what the expectations are at the school in order to do well. In contrast, one counselor stated: *“I do not see a Native American child different than I see any other student. Each has a unique family and circumstances, which is what makes us individuals.”* The same premise for counseling practice was shared by another counselor at the same school district. He/She would not answer the interview questions because that meant separating Native American students from the other students in the school. This counselor said that singling out Native American students was contradictory to everything that he/she believes in. When students come into his/her office, he/she treats them as if he/she were talking to a spouse, a child, or a friend. This counselor asserts that he/she does not see color or race.

A social worker who was interviewed spoke with enthusiasm about his/her many experiences working with Native American children. He/She changed his/her whole approach to reaching Native Americans and this methodology he/she calls being a *“systems motivator instead of a direct practitioner.”* His/her job is to keep children motivated, teachers excited about education, and students providing support to one another. *“In the process, to infuse joy into the whole system. We can talk about academics, but we do not think of the affective overlay which is [that] the person apart from joy is not going to learn, they are going to do it resentfully and grudgingly.”* Another educator working at a school located on the reservation stated that he/she believes in an old philosophy that the worker (student) should have a voice. In his/her school, the school staff are asked questions to evaluate the jobs that the staff are doing to make a child feel valued. One example given was, *“how can we make the education process important to each student so that they feel ownership and leadership within the*

school system?” Administrators and school personnel agree that they have little control in what happens outside of the school doors. But, when the students are in the school building, the school personnel can help the students respond to the challenges of the day. Part of that responsibility means *“being a cheerleader and saying you can do it!”*

An administrative leader of one participating school in the research project noted that *“a counselor works with Native American students from a guidance/ career focus, in addition to the socialization needs of pupils.”* His job is to look at a student’s four-year plan and ask questions like: *“What are your interests, what can your prior school tell me about where you would like to be in four years? Does the ASVAB career assessment test help out in terms of career choices?”* This counselor encourages students to take classes that they will enjoy on their journey to a diploma. Enjoyment of school should be important for the students, whether they are preparing for college, technical school, or entering the “school to work” program. From his standpoint, they are also helping kids systemically. One administrator stated, *“Counselors are critical in helping students work out their relationships problems with their peers, teachers or parents. When we give service to our Native American population and help them with socialization and bridge the achievement gaps, we are helping all students.”* Other educators also commented during the research interview process, that making sure that students know there are resources available and that opportunities exist for them to become positive, contributing adults in society should be the goal of every educator. In conclusion, most of the counselors and administrators who were interviewed had similar philosophies to the one just given above relating to the counselors’ roles in helping Native American students achieve a greater level of academic success.

Importance of Counselor Connections with the Native American Community

As stated by most survey participants, counselors have additional dimensions to their job. For instance, it is their duty to become acquainted with the community and the parents of the students. By so informing close relatives and other community members, counselors can greatly contribute to the success of the children's educations. One administrator said that it is a common belief held by non-Indian people that Native American parents show little interest in the education of their children; but this belief contradicts what was found by the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (refer to Chapter Two). According to this Task Force report, parents are the strongest support children have. The problem is that many parents do not know how to help their children or how to make connections with the school (Gilliland, 1995).

Being a liaison between the teacher, the school, the students, and the tribe is another important aspect of counselors' working with Native American people. It is the job of the student to learn, and it is the responsibility of the counselors to familiarize themselves with the cultures and backgrounds of their students. An education mentor and a school counselor working on the reservation spoke of the importance of visiting Native American people in the community at every opportunity. In order to be successful in reaching the children, counselors need to develop relationships with the extended families, especially the mothers and grandmothers. It is a lot easier if the counselors are from the community; but, if not, there are ways to become connected with family members by being visible at in-school activities or extracurricular events. Native American parents appreciate seeing other people who are just as excited for their children as they are and are more likely to accept counselors who have their children's best

interests in mind. The Native American parents need to see that counselors respect them and their culture, and that the counselors are honest with them. If the counselors show these characteristics, it will become evident to the Indian parents that the counselors want to understand the ways of the Native American community.

Native American parents and grandparents will provide the most information about the culture and their children. As per one administrator, waiting until there are problems to visit the homes is not in the best interests of the students. Also, some parents, no matter how much they are encouraged, will not come to the school. So by being liaisons, and by visiting the Native American parents in their home comfort zone, counselors can provide enriching support which will generate links between the indigenous community and the school.

The results of this survey illustrate that the importance of relationships is significant when working with Native Americans. A school counselor must be an ally to Native American families. In addition to the current responsibilities that include academic assistance, personal/social, and post-high school preparation, educators working with Native Americans must connect with families, make the effort to ask questions, and possess the qualities of flexibility, willingness, and strong support. One administrator remarked, *“Pedagogy. If school professionals can uncover what motivates their American Indian students, they can be a meta-cognitive entity. This means that each pupil will be able to manage their own learning and continue the enriching process long after high school.”* This educator stressed that school educators must make clear the educational expectations; and, in addition, they must trust that Native American

children, no matter where they have come from, are capable of choosing their own futures.

Transitioning: Building Bridges between Middle Schools and High Schools

Within the school districts of Vilas and Oneida counties, most Native American students receive their elementary education from a public school located on the reservation. Then, these Native American students move to another public school in ninth grade. Oneida County has a high school where Native American students join surrounding community schools to receive their high school education. This transition from an essentially all Native American school (95% of the students are Native American) to a public high school with a diverse student population was a primary concern for all participants of this research project. All these participants agreed that the transition from middle school to high school for the Native American student population is very challenging, and, at times, even problematic. The following section will address the viewpoints of survey participants regarding transitional issues for Native American students going from middle school to high school.

One issue concerning school counselors, administrators, and other community members who participated in this research project was the traumatic transition for students, Native and non-Native, into the high school. There is a lot of stress and anxiety for all students according to an administrative member of the high school in Oneida County. This administrator states that the freshman year for all of the students is difficult because they are “*little kids in big people’s bodies.*” This administrator continued by saying that “*the transition for the Native American children is not as much a racial issue as it is an economic one.*” In the high school, there are those who have and those who

have not. Also the ninth grade “turf war” behavior is common, meaning “*this is my lunch table, this is our hallway,*” etc. According to one survey participant, these entering students want to have all the opportunities out there. The problem is that they do not have the skills to resolve issues in a mature fashion as they arise. It becomes easier to yell and call one another derogatory names. As this survey participants states, “*The majority of students in this building are not racist on either side (Native or non-Native). But they may have parents or friends who are and that causes behaviors from students that are not acceptable from both groups of students.*”

According to another survey participant, Native American students do not know what to expect when they arrive at the high school. At the school located on the reservation, one walks through the halls and one sees many different forms of Native American art and culture. Such Native American identifiers are not very visible in the high school. In addition, when the Native American students come to the high school, they are no longer the majority; they are the minority. The elementary school located on the reservation is 95% Native American and they mix with a 99% population of European ancestry for high school. As one of the interviews said, “*It is a huge transition, and one that does not happen easily. How do you find a balance to celebrate all the cultures?*” The majority of those interviewed for this project shared the same sentiment. With this transition comes a feeling of being overwhelmed on the part of the Native American students. One survey participant summed it up by the saying, “*When a Native student at age fifteen comes into a school with predominantly white and European culture, they feel intimidated.*” Another common testimonial shared by research participants was that Native American students are completely removed from the elementary school

environment and teachers that they had grown to trust and love. They saw the same teachers for eight years at the elementary school. Now, they are in a completely new setting. They often do not have ownership in the “new” building, itself, or in their “new” teachers.

The high school, located in a small town in Oneida County, has fewer than 1,000 students according to Starck (2003). Students from five elementary schools, other independent/ religious schools, and home-schooled children converge into this one school for their high school education. Thus, this high school has a diverse population of students coming from many different backgrounds including students from another “nation,” the Indian reservation. As one school counselor observed, the high school serves students living within a radius of 90 square miles. Some students are bussed at least one hour and fifteen minutes, one way. One high school administrator commented in the community paper by saying, “*the distance provides possible impediments to broader social activities that may be available in a dense geographic community*” (Starck, 2003, p. 44). The students are not able to congregate before or after school together because of lack of opportunity due to bussing. This issue has been a prevalent and an on-going concern for many years according to the high school principal. Traditionally, in years past, the school brought the students from the feeder buildings into the high school the day before the school year officially began. This was done in an effort to familiarize the students with their new school and with each other. However, there are real, preconceived ideas among both the Native American and non-Native American students about the high school life and about other students from the joining

community schools. The principal being interviewed emphasized the high level of anxiety for all the ninth graders during those first few weeks of high school.

There is not doubt that this transition is difficult for everyone. *“We can do a better job with the transition academically and socially,”* remarked one administrative participant who likened the situation between the high school and the feeder schools to a rope with many threads (the various programs and the community as threads). He stressed that the goal is to wind those threads into a rope. In addition, the schools’ administrative teams are working to close the academic gaps in the curriculum taught in the feeder schools and the high school. The administration team at the high school is furthering its plans for medium and long-term goals focused on improving student relations.

School Programs in Place for Native American Students

School administrators, counselors, and other educators who were surveyed discussed the current initiatives that are in place for Native American students to assist them in bridging the gap between middle school and high school. These initiatives include transitional activities during the eighth grade as well as programs such as the Intercultural Leadership Initiative Program (ILI), the Experimental Education Program, the Action Program, the GEAR-UP Program, the Extended Resources Program, the Journey Program, and the Marty Project. These will be discussed in further detail in this section. The researcher will also highlight strengths and weaknesses of these various programs as voiced by survey participants of this research project.

As indicated by survey participants, the most common transition activity is meeting with incoming students during the eighth grade school year. These meetings

orientate students regarding the classes that are offered at the high school. Then, students visit the new high school for an orientation process prior to the opening of school. These activities have had only a moderate success. A representative from one of the feeder schools shared this sentiment: *“I think both groups [feeder schools and the high school] need to improve communication. We need to be caring places focused on the students’ needs academically, socially, and emotionally.”*

The Intercultural Leadership Initiative (ILI) was formed in 1999, according to one of the survey participants. Starck (2003) confirmed this information in his newspaper article. In this newspaper editorial, Starck reported that this program was started from a community led organization. The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Inc now runs the ILI Program. ILI was designed in order to help ease the transition for middle school students entering high school and to help promote cultural tolerance and understanding through intercultural experiences at the elementary school level.

ILI starts at the fourth grade level and students in grades four through eight are selected to participate. A high school administrator clarified the specifics of this program by saying that, *“students in the high school are part of a pilot program. Not until the 2005-2006 school years does the first class enter the high school that has been exposed to ILI since the fourth grade.”* According to the director of ILI, one of the goals is to develop a transition team that will coordinate efforts to ease the academic and social transition from the elementary schools into the high school. This director emphasized that more summer programming should be in place during the transitional summer between eighth and ninth grades, before the students enter high school. There are many obvious strengths in this program. First, there are many activities in place to bring children from

all of the feeder schools together before ninth grade. These activities include bake sales, benefit concerts, service projects, and cultural fairs. The culture fairs have been a success as indicated by the ILI director. The cultural fairs provide a way to bring the parents from the feeder communities together to see student projects and learn about each others' cultures and traditions.

Evidently, there have been some drawbacks to the ILI Program. Some of the survey participants pointed out weaknesses in this program. One participant commented on the entry age level of the participants: "*Initiatives with such powerful messages need to be launched earlier than fourth grade.*" In addition, an observation shared by the counselors was that only a select few are able to participate in ILI. If more students were to be targeted, then a greater number of students could experience the benefits. But, for now, the majority of respondents in this research project believe that this program enables some students to get to know other students in the surrounding communities and, in so doing, helps in dissolving stereotypes. In turn, the ILI initiated interactions may have an immediate impact on the students' friends and families. According to the *Lakeland Times* newspaper, one student said this about ILI, "*One person changing their view is a huge difference. One person can lead to an entire family having an open mind*" (Starck, 2003, p. 43).

A social worker, who participated in the interview, spoke about his/her push to give Native American students a new opportunity besides the traditional classroom education. He introduced experimental education. This curriculum involves expressive art, dance, and theater as well as the chance to learn about outdoor skills and the natural environment and participate in hands-on activities outside of the traditional classroom.

An experimental education program called ACTION (Adventure Communication Teamwork Inspiration Options Never-Ending) is also being implemented by a number of school officials including the principal of the high school located in Oneida County. The primary goal of ACTION is for student mentors and teachers to team up with their classmates in order to enhance the lines of communication, the ultimate goal being the breaking down of the barriers of prejudice and making friendships between Native Americans and non-Native Americans.

In addition to the ILI Program and the ACTION Program, another program is being implemented which affords the high school the opportunity to have another advocate in the building who works with the ninth graders. The program called GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Recognition of Undergraduate Programs) was explained by the Indian Education Mentor, Melvin Buckholtz. *“With programs like GEAR-UP, students can see what is out there for them after high school. There is also an after school tutor program, and a school within a school at the other end of the building and an alternative school at the Indian Museum. These are outstanding opportunities for students who are credit deficient, not only with our Native American students but with all of our students.”* Since some of the students were not being successful at the high school the Extended Resources Program was implemented. This program allows students to complete course work in an alternative school setting. Although most of the students in this program are Native American, it is open to all students. An administrator in the high school commented positively about this program: *“This was a chance for the school and the tribe to work together to pay teachers and create a computer book cooperative program. Some of the students go into the school for part of the day and take elective*

classes. It is not quite three hours per day they spend getting their high school diploma, working on those extra credits that they are behind in.”

As stated by many of the survey participants, making that transition from the community schools to the high school is a concern that is being looked at, but many of them feel that more needs to be done to make transitioning easier. One educator working directly with Native American students would like to see programs like a freshman focus seminar, where classes would learn study skills, school rules, the school song, and how to get around the building. This educator states, *“The greater picture says that we need to be doing something before they come into school, at a younger age.”*

Another program used by the high school in Oneida County is the “Journey Program.” Journey is a unique approach to drug prevention/intervention, as described by one of the social workers participating in the survey. Currently about 60 students are participating in the Journey Program. This program focuses on developing the necessary relationships between students and staff when confronting alcohol and other drug issues. The Journey Program sponsors weekly climb nights for the whole family at the school’s climbing wall. As described by the program’s leader, the outdoor adventure aspect incorporates rock climbing, ropes courses, orienteering, environmental ethics and wilderness safety. The program also focuses on the emotional needs of the teens: feeling wanted belonging, building trust, and autonomy. These same issues of feeling secure and safe correlate with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs discussed by another educator interviewed for this project (refer back to page 36). The Journey Program encourages alternatives for excitement and risk taking (Daniels, 2004). Instead of the *“I don’t care”* attitude, the director of Journey practices the *“attitude of gratitude.”* This means that

students are encouraged to talk about what they are thankful for and to express their positive feelings. Another educator working with Native Americans agrees that, *“Getting involved in something positive they [Native American students] are going to be more likely to take pride in themselves and their activities.”*

Lastly, there is a program in place that targets Native American students specifically. It is called the Marty Project. According to sources working for the tribe, the Multi-Agency Response for Tribal Youth (MARTY) is a voluntary, early intervention program designed to assist tribal youth and their families in changing problematic behaviors. This program strives to take the preventative approach in working with at-risk youth. Some of the programs include a truancy reduction program, after-school tutoring, and Friday night open gym.

According to tribal educators, there are other incentives in place to promote reading, good behavior, and satisfactory grades. Gift certificates to redeem at the annual book fair are given to children at the elementary level who demonstrate positive attitudes and meet the grading criteria. As students enter middle school and high school, cash incentives are awarded to those with grade point averages of 2.0 or above and no suspensions (in or out of school). *“These programs do work,”* was the consensus of the two Native American education mentors interviewed. One of these mentors stated, *“I have seen Native American students that have been able to succeed at a high level.”* One survey participant of the research interview concurred, saying: *“First students must have the right attitudes and values to make them productive community members and successful learners.”* One educational specialist working with Native American students concluded with this poignant comment, *“We’re all about making choices and making it*

possible for students to explore new ways to apply their skills to their own interests and experiences.”

To summarize, in this chapter the major issues affecting Native American learning, as witnessed by educators participating in the research survey, were discussed. Also examined were the ways in which counselors work with students and their families to bridge the gap between school and home. Next, school transitional matters that affect the learning environment of Native American students were highlighted. Lastly, the programs for Native American students that are in place within school districts in these counties were identified and described.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter will include a discussion of the results of the study and conclusions. Also incorporated into this chapter will be recommendations for further research.

Summary And Conclusions

It has been more than thirty-five years since the United States issued the Kennedy Report, which analyzed the education received by Native Americans. The Meriam Report (1928) and the Kennedy Report (Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969) documented the failure of formal education and called for more Indian involvement, control, and relevancy in the educational process. The Indian Nations At Risk Task Force Report (1991) recognized "twenty years of progress" during the 1970's and 1980's, but concluded that Indian communities were "nations at risk" educationally (Martin, 1996, np).

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the educational opportunities for Native American students and to discuss the cooperative efforts of school administrators, school counselors, and other educators in assisting these students. Native American student success in middle school and high school is an important issue to the school community and the broader community of the northeastern region of the State of Wisconsin.

Many people have written about or expressed their viewpoints in relation to Native American participation in academics. In order to incorporate many different

voices into the research, the researcher assumed a neutral listening stance in the interview situations.

In discussing her research on the various perspectives concerning Native American students, the researcher worked hard to develop a comprehensive, accurate, and thorough description of statements made by the survey participants. As a result, this paper reflects many different perspectives on the challenges and obstacles faced by Native American students attending school in the northeastern region of Wisconsin. Research results correlate with data found in Gilliland (1995). All children want to succeed. Native American children want to succeed not only for themselves, but also for their people (Gilliland, 1995). All students can do well in school but it takes the efforts of enthusiastic school personnel willing to reach out to Native American students, and it also takes perseverance to reach out to children's families for support. Educators that were interviewed share similar recommendations for motivating Native American students to succeed. Native American students need to believe that the school community is a place full of caring individuals interested in helping them achieve their highest potential. When programs are in place to help children reach attainable goals, this enhances everyone's chances for excellence and also increases their feelings of being in charge of their lives (Gilliland, 1995).

Responses to Research Questions

Research Question #1 queried the research participants (school administrators, counselors, and other educators) on the major issues affecting Native American learning. Participants of this study thought that the social issues (such as divorce, abuse, and addiction) that Native American children face outside of school have not only a direct,

but a deep, connection to education. As indicated by survey participants, if children are dealing with outside stressors not associated with school, there are negative impacts placed on these children that in turn affect their level academic achievement. According to almost half of those educators interviewed, the process of learning and behavior is very much affected by peer involvement. For Native Americans, the first priorities are families and community; getting jobs and raising individual statuses are second priorities.

Research Question #2 queried the research participants (school administrators, counselors, and other educators) on the roles of the school counselors in assisting Native American students. According to all survey participants, school counselors play a very prominent and versatile role in the lives of Native American students. They work with these students in many different areas. These areas include direction regarding personal/social issues, career and vocational guidance, and academic support. Their job is to ensure that students know the resources that are available for students within the school and community. There are school counselors who are able to develop in their students a feeling of pride in belonging to a group. The challenge, according to some survey respondents, is for school counselors to help students develop positive attitudes and understand the importance of education.

Research Question #3 queried the research participants (school administrators, counselors, and other educators) on the significance of the relationship between school counselors and the Native American community in assisting the level of Native American academic achievement. According to most survey respondents, cooperation between the school community, parents, and the students is extremely important in order for children to do well during middle school and high school. This correlates with research from

Gilliland (1995), Bernard (1997), and Reyhner (1992). It is important that school officials know the community and the parents of the students because the Native American parents can contribute greatly to the success of their children's education if they are informed. According to over half of the survey respondents, parental involvement is the way to increase the level of Native American student achievement. Such an interactive network of parents, school, and the communities working together demonstrates to the children that learning is important. Survey participants' responses parallel the research findings of Gilliland (1995). He states that partnerships between school counselors, administrators, and other educators with the Native American community can reinforce the idea that every student is expected to complete school and develop skills to become self-sufficient, contributing members for the greater good of the community.

Research Question #4 queried the research participants (school administrators, counselors, and other educators) about the impact of transitions for Native American students especially the transition from middle school to high school. Overall, the research participants agreed that one of the toughest adjustments Native American students make during their educational careers is from eighth to ninth grade. This transition impacts the Native American students in many ways. Many students do not know what to expect when they arrive at the high school. There is a difference between the school located on the reservation and the unified high school, made up of many community feeder schools. Being Native American and the majority in one elementary school, and then, becoming a minority student in the high school is a huge adjustment.

Research Question #5 queried research participants (school administrators, counselors, and other educators) about the programs which are in place for Native Americans to assist them in middle school and high school. The survey results illustrate that the respondents in this study clearly have a sound understanding of the struggles that face the Native American population. Survey participants highlighted ways in which they are working to combat the transitional issues and have detailed programs in place to assist Native American students in achieving academic success. Programs such as the Intercultural Leadership Initiative, ACTION, and the Journey Program offer opportunities for Native Americans to interact with others students in a variety of ways, providing improved communication among elementary schools. Moreover, many of the survey participants emphasized that it is their goal to help promote tolerance and understanding through intercultural experiences at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Recommendations for Further Research

Several suggestions are offered for further research in the field of Native American education and collaboration between school administrators, counselors, other educators, students and their families. Future research might examine, to a greater degree, the impact that social factors have on the Native American population. A written survey format could be used in place of an interview research design. Such a written survey should focus on attitudes, perceptions, and expectations that school counselors, administrators, and teachers hold in regards to Native American students. Students, both Native American and non-Native American, should also be surveyed in order to measure their attitudes toward how they view their educational experience. Likewise, it would be

beneficial for educators to evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs targeted at Native American students. Furthermore, specifically surveying Native American students would give researchers a better understanding of the issues affecting their education.

Replications of this study should include a larger sample size of counselors, administrators, and agency employees who work with Native American students. Further research should provide deeper insights into the reasons behind transitional issues and the effectiveness of existing programs targeting Native American students. Replications of this study using a different regional focus might include different school districts in the state of Wisconsin which have a significant population of Native American students.

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Appendix A Consent Form

Project Title: Native Americans at the Middle School and The High School Level: Are They at Risk?

Jamie Miller, a graduate student in the School Guidance and Counseling Department at the University of Wisconsin-Stout is conducting a research project titled *Native Americans at the Middle School and High School Level: Are They at Risk?* The research will examine the barriers and contributors to American Indian success in middle and high school.

You have been selected to participate in the research because of your position as an administrator or a guidance counselor. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. It is not anticipated that there is any risk to you. Once the study is completed, the findings will be available for your information, unless so indicated by you (see below). Your specific answers will be kept confidential.

Knowing your heavy work schedule, the researcher appreciates your willingness and time commitment to participate in this interview process.

Please check the appropriate response that applies to you:

May I use your name and school district when recording my data? Yes No

May I quote you directly pertaining to our interview? Yes No

Questions or concerns about the research study should be addressed to Jamie Miller, (715-432-3548) or Dr. Beatrice Bigony (715-232-1503), Social Science, 308A Harvey Hall. Question about the rights of research subjects can be addressed to Sue Foxwell, (715-232-2477), Human Protection Administrator, and UW-Stout Institution Review Board for the Protection of Human Subject in Research, Stout Solutions, Research Services, 152, Vocational Rehabilitation Building.

I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and I may discontinue my participation at any time without prejudice.

I understand the purpose of this study is to investigate the problem: Native Americans at the middle school and the high school levels: Are they at risk?

By signing below I attest that I have read and understood the above description. I hereby give my informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Name:

Present Position/ Title:

Length and Types of Service at the School District:

Present Responsibilities:

What is your role in ensuring that all students feel welcome and a part of the school?

How much contact do you have with Native American students on a daily basis?

Weekly basis?

Monthly basis?

What positive characteristics have you found in Native American students regarding academic achievement?

What characteristics have you found in Native American students, which tend to lead to lack of success in academic achievement?

What types of issues in this school affect Native American student behavior?

What types of issues in this school affect Native American learning?

Are their issues the same as the other populations present within the school system? Yes or no. Please Explain.

How do you measure the progress of Native American students in your school?

What is the transition like from middle school to high school for the Native American student population?

What do you see as the role of administrators in assisting Native American students academically?

What do you see as the role of counselors in assisting Native American students academically?